



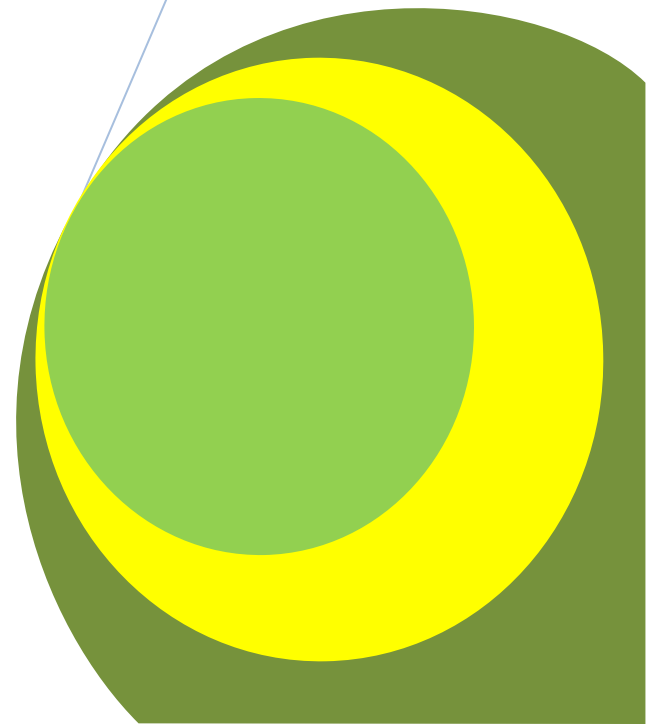
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Ethical Issues in Health Care in the UAE

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT

Ethics is the heart of health care (Seedhouse, 2003). Health is everybody's business and everything in health care involves some degree of morality. Working in health, health care development and delivery, health services planning and provision as well as managing in the health environment and health assessment involve moral behavior. So also are public health dimensions such as health protection, illness prevention and health promotion activities. This article investigates ethical issues in health care in the UAE and identifies a number of ethics related issues and problems. They include malpractices and botched operations, inadequate information on procedures and cost to patients, sale of prescription only drugs over the counter, designer babies and Doctors being remunerated on commission basis. The article concludes that these ethical issues may have adverse effects on health care provision, accessibility and affordability. The article suggests a number of strategies to address the issues including new legislation prohibiting commission payments to medical professionals, enforcement of existing legislation and professional ethics, general public awareness campaigns and education.

Keywords: Ethics, Issues Healthcare Abu Dhabi.

INTRODUCTION

Ethics is the heart of health care (Seedhouse, 2003), and there is an expectation that health care providers and all health professionals will adopt a degree of ethics in their professional duties and practice. Throughout the UAE, stories of unethical health care practices continue to be heard and read unabated. From Abu Dhabi to Ras Al Khaimah, Dubai to Fujairah, stories of unethical health practices have been doing the newspaper rounds regularly (Gulf News, 2011a: 2; Gulf News, 2011b: 3).

Major ethical issues include over the counter sale of prescription medication including very powerful and highly dangerous drugs which endanger lives (if used without medical supervision), Doctors and other health and medical professionals being compensated on "commission basis", malpractices and botched procedures, inadequate information to patients and clients, the lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate health care and many more. The great diversity of population, the large number of nationalities (Yeboah, 2007) as well as the associated cultural realism and the cosmopolitan nature of the UAE society presuppose the prevalence of numerous and diverse norms, values, beliefs, attitudes and perception towards health.

The point must further be made that different population subgroups have different ethical and cultural practices which they bring over to the UAE from their original countries. There is research evidence to collaborate the position that ethics is a major issue in health (Yeboah, 2000; Seedhouse, 2003: 96 and 117; Raven, 2002; Yeboah and Yeboah, 2014). Besides the situation is exacerbated by the fact that what is ethically appropriate to one population group may be unethical among other population subgroups (Yeboah, 2000; 2013). This makes any analysis of ethics in health more complex but critical at the same time.

Many ethical issues are discernible and includes over the counter sale of prescription only medications, botched operations, Doctors paid by commission, Doctors asking patients to undergo unnecessary diagnostic and therapeutic procedures, Doctors raising funds for their employers by referring patients unnecessarily to other specialists within their medical organization etc. The study focuses on the themes and issues and unethical practices mentioned above.

PURPOSE OF AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The purpose of this article is, therefore, to examine unethical practices in health care in the UAE, identify the nature and dimensions of unethical practices and draw attention to some of those practices. The point is that ethics is the

fundamental basis for effective and efficient health care delivery, and unethical practices undermine efforts to improve health status in the country. For example, the dangerous practice of selling prescription only drugs over the counter has created injuries, illnesses and fatalities (Yeboah, 2013; Yeboah and Yeboah, 2014). The situation will get worse if not addressed.

The best approach to addressing these ethical problems is to draw attention to the problems through research and publication of research findings. This is the rationale behind the study. We need to address the problem, but to ensure the efficient and effective approach to addressing the problems, evidence-based research is absolutely essential. Sight should also not be lost of the fact that no such study has been undertaken in the UAE, albeit ethical issues, such as over the counter sale of prescription only drugs, remain problematic. The need to identify and address the underlying issues cannot be overemphasized and the study provides further insights into the issues, strengthening the need for and importance of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Not much exists on ethics and health care in particular and population and health generally, in the published research literature on the UAE. Raven (2002) discussed the intersection of healthcare organizational ethics, pointing out that healthcare providers are business organizations with ethical issues. Gulf News (2011c) discussed ethical issues surrounding Doctors being remunerated by commission instead of salary, while Gulf News (2011b) reported warnings from health professionals regarding the sale of prescription medication over the counter.

National Newspaper (2011:1) pointed out the growing problems with waiting lists for various health procedures in the UAE while Yeboah (2007) examined population growth and the demand and provision of health services in the UAE up to 2006. He found that population growth was accompanied by new medical centers and increased number of public and private health services.

Yeboah (2005) compared reproductive health in the Gulf with the Caribbean, noting the vast improvements in maternal and child health in the UAE and GCC over the decades. Okaida (2003) examined mental health in the Arab world while Zufur (2003) focused on women empowerment in the Arab world. Rosling (1999) and Bener et al. (1993) investigated health developments in the UAE, emphasizing the rapid growth in the provision of health services in the country. In addition, Bener et al. (1993) focused on the variables affecting or concerning health in the UAE focusing on primary health care. They examined the 1986-1991 health strategy and concluded that health care had improved in the UAE. In addition, Matthew (2001) studied obesity in the UAE, indicating that there was a need to target obesity in the UAE. He concluded that obesity has a far greater impact in the UAE than acknowledged. UAE Ministry of Health (2001) presented professional code of conduct for health professionals, defining clearly what ethical practices were expected from medical practitioners and other health professionals.

Yeboah and Yeboah (2014) used a triangulation methodology (Patton, 1990) to examine the over the counter sale of prescription medicines in Abu Dhabi, noting that the practice was endemic and very difficult to eradicate. In a related study, Yeboah and Yeboah (2013) proposed a number of strategies to address the over the counter sale of prescription only medicines in Abu Dhabi, emphasizing multi-strategy and comprehensive approach to deal with the issues. The strategies include law enforcements, application of professional ethics and public awareness through education and other awareness campaigns. Ethical issues in health care have not received any attention in the published research literature on the UAE, hence the significance of this initial study.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study followed some of the themes identified in the introduction and investigated them to establish the nature and extent of the issues, using investigative techniques such as collecting information from the parties involved. The investigation team visited hospitals and medical centers, contacted patients formally and informally about the ethical issues and obtained data from the health professionals as well 19 patients were contacted and 21 health professionals responded to the study concerns, comprising 9 Doctors and 12 Nurses and other health professionals. The point must be made that this is not a large scale quantitative study as the study's focus was on investigating specific unethical cases of public interest.

FINDINGS

Table 1 shows the distribution of study subjects and points to 19 patients, 9 Doctors and 12 other health professionals being involved in the study.

Table 1. Distribution of study respondents, UAE, 2013

Category of Respondent	Number	% of Total
Doctors	9	22.5
Nurses and Other Health Professionals	12	30.0
Patients	19	47.5

Many ethical issues in health care provision in the UAE have been identified and investigated in this study. The results are as follows:

UAE and Other Cultures

The study found that the UAE has a very mixed population and diverse cultures. The study also found that the UAE Ministry of Health, the Health Authorities in individual Emirates and the various health providers generally strive to provide excellent health care in accordance with national priorities, policies and practices. The study noted that the diverse populations and the associated cultural diversity continue to pose a major ethical challenge and dilemma. While the professed position of the health authorities of the country is to meet the health care needs of the nationals or Emiratis, efforts are made to address the health care needs of other populations. The issue or dilemma is evident in the question; which cultural values, ethics and norms do the health providers adopt - Emirati or other? In many societies, this question would attract a simple response because there is usually a dominant population. The problem for most health care providers in the UAE is that they have a primary responsibility to provide excellent health care for UAE nationals first, but they are faced with increasing demand from other nationalities generated by rising levels of labor immigration. The stand point of this study is that health care providers have a duty of care to establish the right balance of ethics to meet the needs of UAE's diverse populations and cultures.

Sale of Drugs over the Counter

The endemic practice of selling prescription- required medicines over the counter has been documented by Yeboah and Yeboah (2014) With the exception of controlled medicines which require controlled medicine prescription (special prescription form), virtually any medicine can be purchased in the UAE without prescription. Of the 73 outlets observed by Yeboah and Yeboah (2014), none asked for prescriptions for a number of prescription- required medicines including antibiotics, Daonil, Metformin, Ex-forge HCT of various strengths etc. The findings from Yeboah and Yeboah (2014) are corroborated by Gulf News (2011a; b). For example, in recognition of the problem, Gulf News (2011a:3) wrote: "People have been urged to consult their Doctors when taking medicines without prescription. This is because over the counter medicines can lead to organ failure or death".

The present study found that the practice was prevalent unabated, with pharmacists and their clients indulging in the practice with impunity and without fear of the legislation. The greatest concern is that all the 131 buyers interviewed by Yeboah and Yeboah (2014) expressed a view to continue with the practice, so also were the respondents from the 73 pharmacies.

Workforce and Women

An interesting finding of the study was that the number and proportion of female health professionals raised various ethical questions. Given the large female population, it would be expected that the number of female Doctors and Dentists would be high. Alas, this was not the case. The potential exceptions are in the fields of pharmacy and nursing, where the proportion of female professionals is high. The point is that UAE and other Arab women would culturally prefer to be attended to by female health professionals and, as a result, it continues to be the position of this study that an urgent need exists to address the gender imbalance in the health workforce in the UAE.

Doctors Paid by Commission

Yet another serious ethical issue which was making the newspaper rounds was the payment of Doctors by commission, a practice which has been reported to be prevalent in many clinics in the UAE. Gulf News (2011c) reported that a number of Doctors, especially those working in small clinics were paid on a commission basis. The paper wrote that "the burgeoning number of small clinics in various Emirates have resulted in them offering commission to Doctors to pull in patients. Besides, many Doctors who are low paid make such deals with clinics". The study found this kind of practice to be completely unethical as it compromises patient care. However, the study could not adequately confirm the practice with concrete evidence. Basically, none of the said clinics was forthcoming

with information and all the 9 Doctors contacted by the investigation team denied the existence of the practice while 8 Nurses and other health professionals indicated that they had heard of the unethical practice but could not provide evidence to support it (table 2). 18 patients confirmed that they had heard of the practice, but 4 other patients were not sure. This does not mean that the unethical practice did not exist, but rather that a culture of silence made it impossible to ascertain the facts. Most of the patients spoken to (90%) believed that the practice was common in many clinics.

Table 2 Responses to commission payment by respondent category, UAE, 2013

Category of respondent	Yes	%	No	%
Doctors	0	0.0	9	100
Nurse/Other Health Professionals	8	67.0	4	33.0
Patients	18	94.7	1	5.2

Unethical Practices by Some Hospitals and Clinics

There have been instances where clinics and hospitals have abandoned ethics and treated patients unfairly. At least, 7 such cases appeared in the local press in the last few months (Gulf News, 2013). A case in point is a patient who underwent a stomach operation to lose weight and died from the surgical operation. All the hospital said was that she knew the risks, albeit she was a borderline candidate for the procedure. There have been situations where very sick patients have been given Panadol and sent home only for their condition to worsen. This study found that many health care providers (including clinics and pharmacies) were not providing adequate information to patients and clients.

A number of malpractices and botched procedures have also been noted (Gulf News, 2013a). There have been instances where unlicensed medication has been administered to patients. In some cases, the family history of the patient is not taken into consideration and adverse reactions have occurred.

An emerging ethical issue is the refusal of health insurance companies to pay some regular claims. A case in point is the ongoing saga between health service providers and insurance companies regarding claims for a number of procedures, leaving the patient in the middle. Many insurers believe that health care providers were asking patients to undergo diagnostic procedures they did not need, including pathology, diagnostic imaging etc. According to Gulf News (2013b), a lack of unified clinical diagnostic pathways results in disputes to the tune of Dh 20.8 million a year. This situation puts unethical burden on patients.

Over 50 patients were interviewed about the practice of asking patients to undergo unnecessary tests and assessment. Many responded that their Doctors have regularly asked them to undertake various tests. Many indicated cases where their Doctors have asked them to do X-rays, ultrasound, CT scan and sometimes Nuclear medicine assessment for the same complaint or illness. A renal patient confirmed that, in addition to regular blood and urine tests, she has been made to undergo a number of different diagnostic imaging procedures, including some of those mentioned above and Renal MAG3 (nuclear medicine).

A related finding was that Doctors were referring patients to their colleagues in other Departments within the organization for unnecessary assessments under the guise of seeking their opinion. Many patients were very strong in their position that such referrals were costing them a lot in terms of time and money. One patient told his hospital experience where one Ophthalmologists passed him round other Ophthalmologist within the hospital. This practice of unnecessary referrals is believed to raise extra money for the organization and that is very unethical.

The point must be made that most Doctors did not agree with what they called offensive allegations, but the evidence was clear from those who were being referred.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study point to various ethical issues in the health care system of the UAE. As noted by Seedhouse (2003), ethics is the heart of health care. The best health systems are generally based on sound ethical practices of both general and professional nature. The intersection of professional ethics with organizational ethics in the UAE has been documented by Raven (2002) and elsewhere by Yeboah (2000). Health care providers are business entities and operate using business principles with a sole aim of making profit. Business practices of health care providers are sometimes at congruence with professional ethics, as providers strive to make more profit. A case in point is the over the counter sale of prescription medicines in the UAE, a practice in which pharmacists do not adopt their own code of ethics and do not oblige with industry regulations (Yeboah, 2013). Many health care providers do

not adopt and implement the best ethical principles in the development and delivery of health services. Obviously, health ethics is not of primary importance to these providers (see also Gulf News, 2011a).

No analysis of ethics in health care in the UAE will be complete without looking at it from the point of view of the population and the society. There is a melting pot of population in the UAE with virtually almost all countries represented in Emirati society. Ethics is founded on the morals, culture, creed, religion (to some extent) and perception of population in individual societies. Different societies and population groups have different cultural practices, belief, perceptions and attitudes towards health care (Yeboah, 2000). What is culturally appropriate in one society may be completely inappropriate in another society, and this transcends the Islam and Christianity divide. The point can further be made that what is ethical for one society may not be ethical for another society.

Health care providers need to consider the mixed nature of the UAE population together with its associated cultural and linguistic diversity and plan for health services which will meet the need of all residents. Planning for one group of residents without due consideration for other residents could be very problematic, and raise ethical issues. The point must also be made that the population of the UAE has been increasing rapidly, due largely to in-migration of workers from other parts of the world. As noted by Raven (2002) and Yeboah (2007), the rapid influx of labor to the UAE has been accompanied by a remarkable development of health services, both public and private. Unethical health care practices have been unintended consequences of these massive developments in the health sector. Organizational ethics and professional ethics must converge to provide patients with maximum health care.

The standpoint taken in this study is that the diversity of population and associated cultures in the UAE should not be an excuse to adopt unethical practices in the development and delivery of health care. This is because certain values are acceptable in all societies including honesty in the provision of information to patients, professional approach to service provision and showing respect for patients and other health care customers. These ethical values, as noted by Yeboah (2013) and numerous Gulf News articles, are conspicuously absent in the health care system of the UAE. In addition, the UAE Ministry of Health (2001) wrote that the purpose of introducing a professional code of ethics for the various medical and health professions to health care and increase confidence in the system. A need exists for the health authorities to put in more effort to achieve this, especially by enforcing the Code.

As noted by Yeboah and Yeboah (2014), the problem with the UAE is the lack of enforcement. The health authorities have been quick to point out that services must be provided with the sole aim of achieving improvements in patient condition. Health Authority Abu Dhabi (HAAD) has also indicated that it is unlawful to sell prescription-required medications without prescription. However, Yeboah (2013) found that the practice of selling medications without prescription was endemic and universal in the sense that all pharmaceutical outlets continued to adopt the unethical practice unabated. In addition, there have been numerous newspaper reports of various unethical practices in health care in the country (see, for example, Gulf News, 2013), and most have occurred without any action being taken.

CONCLUSION

The population of the UAE has increased rapidly since the federation was formed. With the increase in population have come great strides in health care development. The study concludes that the great advances made in medicine, medical practices and health care in the UAE have been accompanied by undesired and unethical health care practices. The standpoint taken in the study is that the unethical health care practices are so widespread that drastic measures are required to eradicate the problems and ameliorate the situation. The study concludes further that a comprehensive approach, involving a combination of strategies, would be required to address the unethical health care practices. The study proposes a number of strategies which have potential to reduce the prevalence of unethical health care practices in the UAE, including new legislation, enforcement of existing legislation, enforcement of professional code of ethics, and public education.

Ethics as noted elsewhere in this article is the heart of health care. A certain degree of ethical consideration and practice is essential for successful health care delivery. All health care providers and health professionals working in the field need to recognize and accept not only the ethics of their organizations, but also professional ethics as applicable to their chosen profession.

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